

# TRANSLATION IN FORMING MUSICAL DISCOURSE: A CASE STUDY OF ENGLISH-LANGUAGE SONG LYRICS IN RUSSIA

*EVGENIYA V. ALESHINSKAYA*

National Research Nuclear University MEPhI, Moscow, Russian Federation  
evaleshinskaya@mephi.ru

## **Abstract**

The paper considers translation as an intermediate stage in the creation of English-language song lyrics by native Russian speakers. Russian songwriters quite often rely on their native language and translate their thoughts from Russian into English. This leads to the use of a “russified” variety of English, which performs poetic and pragmatic functions and serves as a medium harmonizing content, sound, and music. Drawing evidence from 214 songs in various musical genres, as well as 10 ethnographic interviews with Russian songwriters, it examines the specific features of the Russian variety of English used in song lyrics, and discusses the main views on the authenticity of translation in song lyrics depending on the musical genre.

**Keywords:** musical discourse, Russian English, sociolinguistics, song lyrics, translation

## **1. Introduction**

Translation in song lyrics can perform various functions from making a message accessible to a wider audience (Adamu 2010) to emphasizing the performer’s identity, ethnic roots, ideology, etc. (Davis and Bentahila 2008). Although the primary goal of translation consists in retaining semantic closeness (Adamu 2010), in the translation of songs it is no less important to match up the verbal component (lyrics) with the existing music of the original song (Franzon 2008: 390). Several authors pay close attention to such musical features of a song as its melody, harmonic structure, and rhythm, which play a crucial role in song translation (Franzon 2008; Low 2008). In multilingual songs, translation may perform functions other than simply fostering understanding: for instance, it can reflect or reinforce contrasts and/or parallels within a song (Davies and Bentahila 2008), serve comic purposes (Chik 2010) or assert multiple identities (Androustopoulos 2010). Other works demonstrate that in a multilingual performance, translation can serve as a way to gain attention and highlight some essential musical features of the original song (Aleshinskaya 2016); it can also

reinforce the expressive potential of the song and create additional aesthetic meanings (Gritsenko and Aleshinskaya 2016).

This study offers a new look at the role of translation in making song lyrics – that of intermediary in producing texts in a foreign language. Quite often, when in doubt what form or phrase in English to use, Russian songwriters rely on their native language and translate Russian phrases or word combinations word for word so that they fit in the musical frame of the song. Such translations in writing songs are of particular interest, as they demonstrate common structural and functional patterns that. Thus, the aim of this paper is to produce a holistic and dynamic characterization of the specific features of translation from Russian into English as an intermediate stage in the creation of English-language song lyrics by native Russian speakers. The paper also discusses the main attitudes to the authenticity of translation in song lyrics relating to different musical genres.

## **2. Theoretical and methodological background**

The paper is based on several theoretical constructs and models. The sociolinguistics of globalization (Blommaert 2003, 2010) and the World Englishes paradigm (Kachru 1986) provide a broad overarching theoretical framework for this study.

### **2.1. Sociolinguistics of globalization**

A vast majority of songs performed and listened to in today's Russia are in English, either those of Anglo-American origin or those written by Russian songwriters having international aspirations. The importance of the English language as a lingua franca in intercultural communication can be seen in global musical discourse, where English acts as a global language of music (Aleshinskaya 2013). Crystal (2003: 101–103) emphasizes “the dominance of English in the popular music scene today” and the influence of English-language popular music on modern popular culture in general. The specificity of song lyrics written by Russian songwriters is that they either contain a lot of English-language insertions or are written in English, which in general is characteristic of language contact in the context of globalization.

Such specificity of language contact is described in the sociolinguistics of globalization that offers a new understanding of language as a “mobile resource” (Blommaert 2003, 2010). According to Blommaert (2003: 609), Global English enters the repertoire of local language users as a semiotic resource in hybrid identities construction, the impact of such globalized flows being “niched and restricted to particular groups (networks, communities of practice, etc.) in societies.” In other words, globalization does not affect language as a whole, its influence can be observed in certain communicative spaces (niches). Musical discourse and song lyrics as a genre of musical discourse represent such niches.

Musical artists and the music industry act as mediators of globalized flows, allowing “the semiotization of unique indexicalities that point towards the local-global dynamics characterizing and contextualizing the cultural practice” of popular music (Blommaert 2003: 610–611). Further Blommaert (2010) argues that the main specific feature of language contact associated with globalization in particular niches is the insertion of particular globalized varieties of language in existing local repertoires. Thus, in the Russian popular music discourse the globalized language flows are characterized, on the one hand, by the anglicization of the Russian language, which is realized through inserting English-language borrowings into Russian texts and switching from Russian to English, and on the other, by the russification of the English language, which is expressed in the use of a Russian variant of the English language (Gritsenko and Aleshinskaya 2015). For this paper, the latter tendency is more essential, as it is in the Russian variant of English where the specific features of translation as intermediary in creating song lyrics become obvious.

## **2.2. World Englishes paradigm**

Of particular interest are the lyrics written by non-native speakers of English, as they appear to have typical structural and functional peculiarities. The frequency of these peculiarities allows identifying a variety of the English language, which is used in Russian song lyrics and which is presumably identical to the English language, generally acknowledged to be mass spread in Russia (Schennikova 2013). The study of such a variety of English presents some theoretical and methodological difficulty, as its official terminological status is still a subject of domestic debate. In fact, in academic publications it appears under various names: “Russianized English” (Ustinova 2005), “Russian idiom of English” (Schennikova 2013) or “Russian English” (Proshina 2010). Moreover, the attitude toward the Russian variety of the English language is mainly negative, as it is associated with “broken” and “bad” English rather than being seen as a variety of Global English “able to convey Russian culture and Russian ways of thinking to others” (Proshina 2012: 202).

In the study of the local variety of English in the Russian musical discourse and song lyrics in particular, the term “Russian English” feels to be most appropriate, as it aligns with the World Englishes paradigm. The paradigm was developed by Kachru (1986) and suggests three concentric circles: the inner circle, the outer circle, and the expanding circle. According to the World Englishes paradigm, English has travelled from the inner-circle countries to the outer- and expanding-circle countries, and in the process has undergone some modifications in order to suit the needs of non-native speakers in different locations. English in Russia falls under the category of the expanding-circle countries, where it does not have official status, is learned as a foreign language and penetrates the multilingual contexts of the expanding-circle countries through such niches as business, media, advertising, instruction, and popular culture (Ustinova 2005).

Alongside with other World Englishes, Russian English serves as a means of constructing a wide spectrum of sociocultural meanings and identities and involves transfer of Russian users' native language patterns, mental imagery and culture (Proshina 2012).

### 3. Data and method

The research approach adopted to the study of the Russian variety of English in song lyrics was predominantly qualitative and interpretative and consisted of two stages. At the first stage, it comprised the textual analysis of 214 songs belonging to pop (52), alternative rock (66), heavy metal (28), electronic music (39) and hip hop (29) by 20 Russian artists/bands performing in various musical genres: "On-the-Go", "Pompeya", "Weloveyouwinona", "SADme" (indie-rock), "Everything is Made in China", "The Last of Us" (post-rock), "Arcane Grail" (symphonic black metal), "Thanfall" (death metal), "Once" (romantic melodic metal), "Plazma" (synth-pop), Sergey Lazarev (pop), "Therr Maitz" (indie-pop), "Digital Forks" (electronica), "Cheese People" (disco-funk), "Motorama" (New Wave), Timati, Oxxxymiron, "Konstanta", "Quasary" (hip hop). The lyrics were collected, using such search engines as [www.lyricsmania.com](http://www.lyricsmania.com), [www.sentido.ru](http://www.sentido.ru), [www.joov.net](http://www.joov.net), [www.gl5.ru](http://www.gl5.ru). Some lyrics were kindly provided by the members of Nizhny Novgorod based bands like "Thanfall", "Once", "The Last of Us", and "Quasary". The textual analysis helped outline the main features of the Russian variety of the English language used in song lyrics, with a special focus on the sentence structure and morphological peculiarities.

The next stage consisted in applying a critical perspective and "the contextual frame" to the production of texts (Baxter 2010: 128) in order to find an answer to the question, "Why do Russian musicians/songwriters employ English as the core language in their song lyrics?". At this stage, it was important to obtain rich ethnographic data containing musicians/songwriters' own interpretations, to more fully understand the role and function of English in Russian song lyrics. Among the ten representatives of the music industry in Russia who willingly took part in ethnographic interviews were: Vasily Mantrov (sound producer, Nizhny Novgorod), Maria Prokofyeva ("SADme", vocalist/guitar player, Moscow), Ryn ("Operation Plasticine", leader, Tambov), Alexander Rogozhin (session musician, Nizhny Novgorod), Alexey Young Angus Petrov ("The Last of Us", drummer, Nizhny Novgorod), Demether ("Arcane Grail", vocalist, Moscow), Mikhail Suvorov ("Thanfall", guitar player, Nizhny Novgorod), Dmitry Bulyukin ("Once", keyboardist, Nizhny Novgorod), Leha Plus (rapper, Nizhny Novgorod), Alexander ("Ready & Pride", rapper, Moscow). In these interviews, the respondents shared their views on the role of the English language in modern musical discourse and explained why and in what way they made use of English and especially translations from Russian into English in their song lyrics. The

interviews were conducted and transcribed in Russian, and relevant fragments of the interviews were afterwards translated into English.

#### **4. Translation in Russian song lyrics**

The process of writing song lyrics in the English language, which is not the songwriter's native language, can be presented conventionally in the following four stages:

1. Having an idea of a text for a new song.
2. Thinking over the idea in the Russian language.
3. Looking for ways of expressing the original ideas by means of the English language (realization of the idea).
4. Matching the new text in the English language with the musical features of the song, especially its rhythm.

Here, translation is included in the third stage, when the songwriter is looking for ways of expressing his/her ideas in the English language. In this sense, translation acts intermediary between the idea of the song lyrics in Russian and the finished song lyrics in English. At this stage, the Russian variant of Global English appears as a result of language contact between the source language (which is the songwriter's native language, i.e. Russian), and the target language, which is English (the songwriter's foreign language). The following two subsections address the specific features of Russian English as a result of translating parts of the ideas from the Russian language and several ways of understanding the authenticity of the translated texts.

##### **4.1. Specific features of translation**

Due to the differences between the Russian and English morphology and syntax (Proshina 2010: 307), Russian musicians (songwriters) allow deviations from the Standard English norms. As a result of the qualitative analysis of Russian song lyrics, the following features of Russian English grammar have been distinguished: omitting auxiliary verbs, substituting auxiliary verbs, substituting gerunds by verbs, using adjectives instead of adverbs, calquing preposition patterns, calquing pronouns, and omitting or inserting articles (see Table 1). The extracts that follow have been selected as they offer typical examples of the issues under discussion. The examples show that Russian musicians and songwriters rely largely on their competence in the native language and often translate from Russian what they want to express in English.

**Table 1.** Grammatical features of Russian English in song lyrics

Grammatical feature	Example	Source (artist, the song title)
Substituting auxiliary verbs	<i>"I'm not agree with fucking speech about / Revolution in the minds"</i>	The Last of Us, "The Last of Us"
Omitting auxiliary verbs	<i>"Monsters in it __ sweet"</i>	Pompeya, "Cheenese"
Substituting gerund by verb	<i>"Her loving heart keeps him from die"</i>	(Once, "A Princess and a Knight")
Substituting adverbs by adjectives	<i>"Without you I can't see so sharp"</i>	SadMe, "Pain Is like a Drug"
Calquing preposition patterns	<i>"There's a time for realizing / Of what you can stay with in the end"; "Despite of what you think I'm not desperate"</i>	SadMe, "Mary"; Sergey Lazarev, "Almost Sorry"
Calquing pronouns	<i>"That's all what we can do"; "No matter what we'll have and what we'll pay / To keep going, keep losing one's way" "I wanted you, nobody another"</i>	SadMe, "Life to Live"; EIMIC, "Moving Fragments"; Cheese People, "Sombrero"
Inserting and omitting articles	<i>"Nothing can be better than a good advice"; "It's all about / searching for brighter day"</i>	SadMe, "Mary"; Therr Maitz, "Make It Last"

The example sentence *"I'm not agree with fucking speech about / Revolution in the minds"* illustrates a typical Russian "error" – to use the auxiliary verb "to be" instead of "to do" in the Present Simple tense. In Standard English, the sentence would start with *"I don't agree..."*. The sentence is illustrative of another feature of Russian English, such as omitting articles, which will be discussed below. In the sentence *"Monsters in it \_\_ sweet"* the auxiliary verb "to be" is omitted, as the Russian language lacks auxiliary verbs. In Standard English this sentences would look like *"Monsters in it are sweet"*.

In the following sentence *"Her loving heart keeps him from die"* the gerund *dying* is substituted by the verb *die*. This feature is conditioned by the lack of gerunds in the Russian language, so for Russian speakers it is quite expectable to employ verbs instead of "-ing" forms ("from *dying*"). The next feature – substituting adverbs by adjectives – can be found in sentences like: *"Without you I can't see so sharp"*; *"The sun is shining bright in sky"*. Note that in the Russian language, adverbs are formed by adding the suffix "-o" to the adjectival stem. However, Russian speakers do not follow the same pattern in the English language tend to forget to add the suffix "-ly" to adjectives.

Prepositions and pronouns are quite often misused in the process of creating song lyrics in English. The preposition *of* seems to be most often misused in Russian English, probably because the "of + Noun" construction is considered equivalent to the Genitive case in Russian. Schennikova (2013: 185) describes the feature as projecting the language specificity of the internal code of Russian

bilinguals. In the following examples the authors of the texts in English made extra use of the preposition *of*: “*There’s a time for realizing / Of what you can stay with in the end*”; “*Despite of what you think I’m not desperate*”.

The sentence “*That’s all what we can do*” illustrates the common confusion between the relative pronouns *what* and *that*, which look similar and have the same meaning in Russian (the Russian preposition *chto* means both *that* and *what*). The sentence “*No matter what we’ll have and what we’ll pay / To keep going, keep losing one’s way*” reveals the difference in perception of possessive pronouns in the two languages. The Russian pronoun *svoy* is more general in Russian and can mean any person and number (close to *one’s* in English). It actually stands for all possessive pronouns in English: *my, our, your, his, her, its, our, their*. Here it is obvious that the speaker simply looked up for the phrase *to lose one’s way* in the dictionary and forgot to change *one’s* to *our*. In the sentence “*I wanted you, nobody another*” we observe the confusion between *another* and *else* which mean the same in Russian, besides the phrase *nobody another* seems to be constructed on the model of the reciprocal pronoun *one another*.

Finally, Russian users of English very often misuse articles. This can be explained by the fact that the Russian language lacks indefinite or definite articles. So it is not surprising that Russian musicians make “errors” in their use: in Russian English the indefinite article *a/an* is often omitted, and abstract uncountable nouns often take the indefinite article, for instance: “*Nothing can be better than a good advice*”; “*It’s all about / searching for \_\_ brighter day*”.

On the syntactical level, we observe the specific word order patterns caused by the ‘word-for-word’ translation from Russian. One of the most common features of Russian English syntax is the substitution of the ‘complex object’ construction with complex sentences like “*Feeling my future how comes to dust*” (Arcane Grail, “Autumn Wed Us, Ruined and Lone”) instead of “*Feeling my future come to dust*”, and “*I hear the wind blows / I see how the sun burns*” (Therr Maitz, “Robots”) instead of “*I hear the wind blow, I see the sun burn*”.

The examples given above illustrate that, being native Russian speakers, many musicians and songwriters employ the Russian variety of Global English as a means of communication with audience outside their native country. Since their knowledge of English is insufficient, Russian musicians/songwriters often think in Russian and “translate” their thoughts from their native tongue into English. It leads to “russification” of English, as grammatical, lexical, conceptual features of Russian are transferred to the English language. Thus the English they employ is characterized by distinctive features such as specific word order patterns and confusing basic grammatical patterns, as learning the English language in simulated conditions forms a set of stable structural and functional peculiarities “due to consistency of influence of the Russian endonorm on the English-language competence of Russian language speakers” (Schennikova 2013: 183).

The ethnographic interviews with Russian musicians and songwriters revealed that Russian musicians and songwriters often translate from Russian into English, as they lack confidence in the English language. All the respondents admitted that

they at least sometimes used the Russian-English dictionary when writing their song lyrics in English.

#### 4.2. Translation and authenticity

The use of the specific features of the translated song lyrics in the English language, which are sometimes regarded as deviations from Standard variant of the English language, bring about the notion of authenticity. Normally in translation, authenticity assumes equivalence with the original text (Elmgrab 2015). In music, authenticity is very closely correlated with quality: the more authentic (genuine or real) a musician or genre is, the better their quality, and inauthentic artists are considered to be of lower quality than authentic ones (Mattar 2009: 181–182).

Russian musicians and songwriters differ in their understanding of the authenticity of the English language used in lyrics, and it often depends on the musical genre they perform in. Hip hop heads prefer Russian as the main language in their songs “*in order to spell out [their] thoughts and emotions*” (Alexander, rapper). Russian is better understood by the local audience, as the main message of hip hop is protest against the reality rappers are living in: “*Rap is the world of text, the cornerstone of rap – its message, meaning, rhyme*” (Leha Plus, rapper). Thus, the concept foundation of hip hop determines use of Russian in rap lyrics. According to Russian rappers, in hip hop, to sound authentic requires performing in fluent African American English. The lack of English-language proficiency poses a serious challenge for local rappers who have international aspirations, because “*to rap in English, and not to fall in the estimation of the public, is simply unreal*” (Leha Plus, rapper).

However, the respondents belonging to the musical genre of hip hop referred to “a lucky exception” – a famous Russian rapper Timati, who was the first among Russian rappers to release an English-language album in 2012 and turned out to be a success in Europe. His most successful track called “Welcome to Saint-Tropez” was among top 5 on main European charts for more than 20 weeks and became gold and platinum in Switzerland, Germany, and France. The respondents agree that Timati’s success lies in the fact that his English sounds “much more authentic”. However, in hip hop, such cases are practically impossible, it does not happen often that Russian artists’ albums written in English become more popular in Europe than in Russia.

When asked about the motives (motivation?) of using English in song lyrics, musicians performing in alternative rock and heavy metal stressed its global status and prestige: “*Nobody in Europe needs Russian... And we want to move to an international level. We plan to tour in Europe*” (Mikhail Suvorov, lead-guitar, “Thanfall”); “*The English language means fewer problems with distribution abroad. People find it easier to remember, besides there are no problems with encoding, and the Internet search is simpler*” (Alexei Young Angus Petrov, drums, “The Last of Us”). In other words, pragmatically English is believed to



make the music more marketable and is seen as an instrument to connect with wider public beyond Russia.

In addition to the global status and prestige of the English language and Anglo-American music, the respondents also mentioned the “acoustic and melodic” texture of English, which easily blends with the rhythmic structure of rock and heavy metal compositions: “*Stylistics of the genre, i.e. the music, which emerged in the English-language countries, is in harmony with English*” (Alexei Young Angus Petrov, drums, “The Last of Us”); “*Russian is badly pasted into the music I like*” (Alexander Rogozhin, session musician).

As contrasted with hip hop, musicians belonging to heavy metal do not regard non-native English as a disadvantage:

“We don’t care too much about the level of the language in our songs. I guess our audience gets the main idea, and that is enough. Besides the main component of our genre is the sound, the rhythm, people need words to shout to. And we don’t want to work on our accent. A lot of foreign bands from Italy, Sweden, for instance, sing with a strong accent too, but nobody pays attention to it” (Mikhail Suvorov, lead-guitar, “Thanfall”).

This comment illustrates that in pop, rock and heavy metal the musical component (the melody and the rhythmic patterns) comes to the forefront, while the verbal component is pushed into the background, and the knowledge of English is not so essential as in hip hop.

## 5. Conclusion

The role of translation in the creation of song lyrics is shown to be an essential part of the writing process. When in doubt what English form or structure to use, Russian musicians/songwriters quite often rely on their native language and sometimes directly translate their thoughts from Russian into English disregarding intercultural differences in language use. However, translation in the intermediate stage leads to the use of a “russified” variety of English, which is characterized by some distinctive features sometimes regarded as deviations from the English-language norms. In song lyrics, such a variety of English performs poetic and pragmatic functions targeting foreign and local audiences and serves as a medium harmonizing content, sound, and music. Being a powerful tool of intercultural communication, Russian English enables non-native speakers to express themselves and communicate with other non-native speakers from different parts of the world.

Russian musicians differ in their understanding of the authenticity of the English language used in lyrics, and their perception often depends on the musical genre. Thus, in hip hop, to sound authentic requires performing in fluent African American English. In rock and heavy metal, authenticity implies the dominance of particular musical sounds (guitar effects, singing techniques, etc.), and Russian

songwriters sometimes sacrifice authenticity in the interest of the musical qualities. Consequently, it is possible to conclude that the Russian variety of English (Russian English) is for the most part characteristic of such musical genres as rock and heavy metal.

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